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Aaron H Devor

People who would today be known as trans*¹ have always been present in lesbian and gay social communities and political activism. However, their presence and contributions have not always been fully acknowledged or appreciated. This may be because lesbian and gay social justice movements have been largely based on shared collective identities, most often framed as inborn.² Furthermore, because lesbian and gay identities have been most easily understood in terms of conventional understandings of people as men and women, the recognition of trans*, queer, genderqueer, and bisexual people can destabilize the categories of lesbian and gay. Thus, there has been some tension over how to integrate trans*, queer, and bisexual politics into gay and lesbian political movements. As activist organizations have wrestled with these questions, so, too, have those who have sought to record and preserve the history of their work and struggles.

Similar boundary issues have daunted attempts to define homosexuality since the concept of homosexual identity was first developed at the turn of the last century.³ Early sexologists propagated the idea that homosexuality was epitomized by females who wanted to be men, and by males who wanted to be women.⁴ For example, a 1920 article in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, which described the transformation of Lucille Hart into Dr. Alan Hart, was titled *Homosexuality and Its Treatment*.⁵ Likewise, Radclyffe Hall's 1928 book about a female who yearned to be a man, *The Well of Loneliness*,⁶ almost single-handedly

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defined lesbianism in the popular imagination for much of the twentieth century, and is still widely acclaimed as a classic in lesbian literature.⁷ Understandably, in societies that commonly punish gender transgressions as a means to enforce homophobia, many cisgendered gay men and lesbian women have been reluctant to risk being confused with trans* people.

After a brief stint of trans* activism in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century,⁸ it was only in the 1960s that trans* people again began to build politicized organizations under self-defined trans* banners.⁹ At the same time, in the last half-century there have also been many examples of trans* people being shunned by gay and lesbian political organizations, or of having their trans* histories expropriated as lesbian or gay.¹⁰ Despite this, many gay and lesbian organizations have started to embrace and endorse the fight for trans* rights.¹¹

These same historical currents have been evident in the building of archival collections recording the history of LGBTQ+ communities. Most collections, originally conceived as lesbian and gay, have latterly begun to include trans* in their mandates and on their shelves. However, progress has been uneven.

Knowing one's history is essential to one's identity. Learning the history of one's people can be done in many ways, not the least of which is through the examination of material records of the past. Trans* people need to know their past, both as it intertwines with the history of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people, and as it is distinct. Archives are an indispensable way for people to know their heritage. As expressed in the "Universal Declaration on Archives," issued in 2010 by the International Council on Archives and adopted in 2011 by UNESCO:

Archives record decisions, actions and memories. Archives are a unique and irreplaceable heritage passed from one generation to another. . . . They are authoritative sources of information . . . [that] play an essential role in the development of societies by safeguarding and contributing to individual and community memory. Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life.¹²

The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria (British Columbia, Canada) is exceptional in its focus, size, and scope. Our collection is dedicated to "the preservation of the history of pioneering activists, community leaders, and researchers who have contributed to the betterment of transgender people" anywhere in the world.¹³ The University of Victoria is a large, research-intensive public university with a strong and thorough commitment to support of The Transgender Archives. All holdings of The Transgender Archives are accessible

to the public, free of charge, for research, investigation, and exploration. As funds permit, key documents are slowly being made available online at www.transgenderarchives.uvic.ca. At approximately 320 linear feet (97 linear meters) of books, periodicals, and archival materials, our collection is the largest trans*-focused archival collection in the world.

The Transgender Archives began in 2005 over a quiet luncheon in an intimate out-of-the-way restaurant, in a small city, on one of the world's largest islands, off the west coast of Canada. As Rikki Swin and I chatted about the fate of the shuttered Rikki Swin Institute, we began the discussions which led her to donate its entire holdings to the University of Victoria Libraries' Archives and Special Collections.¹⁴ A few years later, while we were still processing that enormous gift, the daughter of Reed Erickson, deceased founder and president of the Erickson Educational Foundation, contacted me about the disposition of her father's extensive papers, and she chose The Transgender Archives as their new home.¹⁵ The third major component of the Transgender Archives came in 2013 when Professor Richard Ekins donated the entire University of Ulster (Northern Ireland, United Kingdom) Trans-Gender Archive to us.¹⁶ The collection has been further enhanced by numerous other smaller and important contributions.¹⁷

Being situated in North America, the records of The Transgender Archives are weighted toward Canadian and U.S. activism and research, with an international reach, most notably representing the United Kingdom. Holdings include over 800 books, including many rare, hard-to-find, and first editions; an extensive collection of informational pamphlets and booklets, generally produced by advocacy organizations for educational purposes; organizational records for several significant trans* activist groups, as well as personal papers from some of the leaders of those organizations; a good representation of newsletters from trans* communities around the world; a varied multimedia collection representing and recording trans* experience; and a wide range of ephemera.

We are now at a crucial time in the history of trans* activism and research. The people who initiated the wave of self-conscious trans* activism that began in the 1960s are reaching the ends of their lifetimes. Many individuals who had the foresight to begin personal archival collections in the decades since then are also reaching points in their lives when they are considering their legacies to future generations. For most of them, the items in their collections were lifelines during times of intense isolation, pervasive pernicious hostility, and socially supported denigration of anyone and anything trans*. Often, they have safeguarded their precious collections in private spaces for decades because they have had nowhere more secure to place them. Some valuable records have

unfortunately been lost because their owners were no longer able to care for them, or because no one knew of a safe place for those important historical materials. The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria is that safe place.

NOTES

1. GATE – Global Action for Trans* Equality offers the following definition of Trans*: “Trans* people includes those people who have a gender identity which is different to the gender assigned at birth and/or those people who feel they have to, prefer to or choose to—whether by clothing, accessories, cosmetics or body modification—present themselves differently to the expectations of the gender role assigned to them at birth. This includes, among many others, transsexual and transgender people, transvestites, travesti, cross dressers, no gender and genderqueer people. The term trans* should be seen as a placeholder for many identities, most of which are specific to local cultures and times in history, describing people who broaden and expand a binary understanding of gender.” See GATE – Global Action for Trans* Equality, “Trans*,” n.d., <http://transactivists.org/trans/> (accessed December 29, 2013).
2. Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?: A Queer Dilemma,” in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 395–420; and Steven Seidman, “Introduction,” in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 1–29.
3. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1981).
4. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Steon & Day, 1965).
5. Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976).
6. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Paris: Pegasus, 1928).
7. Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9 (1984): 557–75; and Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
8. Katie Sutton, “‘We Too Deserve a Place in the Sun’: The Politics of Transvestite Identity in Weimar Germany,” *German Studies Review* 35 (2012): 335–54, 464.
9. Richard Docter, *From Man to Woman: The Transgender Journey of Virginia Prince* (Northridge, CA: Docter Press, 2004); Nicholas Matte and Aaron H Devor, “Building a Better World for Transpeople: Reed Erickson and the Erickson Educational Foundation,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 10 (2007): 47–68; and Members of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California, “MTF Transgender Activism in the Tenderloin and Beyond, 1966–1975: Commentary and Interview with Elliot Blackstone,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4 (1998): 349–72.

10. Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories," in *A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Martin B. Duberman (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 134–52.
11. Amy L. Stone, "More Than Adding T: American Lesbian and Gay Activists' Attitudes towards Transgender Inclusion," *Sexualities* 12 (2009): 334–54.
12. International Council on Archives, *Universal Declaration on Archives*, 2010, <http://www.ica.org/6573/reference-documents/universal-declaration-on-archives.html> (accessed December 29, 2013).
13. The Transgender Archives, n.d., <http://transgenderarchives.uvic.ca> (accessed December 29, 2013).
14. The Transgender Archives, "Rikki Swin Institute (RSI)," n.d., <http://transgenderarchives.uvic.ca/rikki-swin-institute-rsi-2> (accessed December 29, 2013).
15. The Transgender Archives, "Reed Erickson," n.d., <http://transgenderarchives.uvic.ca/reed-erickson-2> (accessed December 29, 2013).
16. The Transgender Archives, "The University of Ulster Trans-Gender Archive," n.d., <http://transgenderarchives.uvic.ca/university-of-ulster-tga-collection> (accessed December 29, 2013).
17. The Transgender Archives, "About," n.d., <http://transgenderarchives.uvic.ca/about> (accessed December 29, 2013).

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